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Absolutism and the Resilience of Monarchy in the Middle East

LISA ANDERSON

The only major ruling monarchs in the world today reside in the Arab world, and they are conspicuous by their importance there. They rule more than a third of the countries of the Arab League. Taken together, the kings in Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the sultan of Oman, and the amirs of the smaller Gulf states—Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates—have almost forty million subjects. They influence access to important strategic waterways—the Straits of Gibraltar, the Persian/Arabian Gulf, the Red Sea—and dispose of staggering financial resources. Several are major oil-producing states, of course, but even the non-oil-producing monarchies are recipients of substantial subventions from foreign friends and patrons. And these are only the survivors; just a few years ago the Middle East fairly bristled with crowns. Non-Arab Iran's shah did not fall until 1979, and kings reigned in Egypt until 1952, Iraq until 1958, Yemen until 1962, Libya until 1969.

Despite the importance of this type of regime in the Middle East and North Africa, few political scientists have given it serious attention, exploring what its prevalence might suggest about politics in the region or about political development more generally. This neglect, all the more striking in light of the lavish attention accorded the military regimes and one-party states of the area, is partly a result of the ease and frequency with which political scientists dismiss the Middle East as an exotic and intractable region, hardly responsive to ordinary comparative analysis. No doubt the neglect is also partly attributable to the largely unspoken consensus among political scientists that monarchy is passé. The inclina-

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tion on the part of American social scientists to write off the world's kings is probably increased by the peculiarly American skepticism about monarchy: for over two hundred years Americans have believed that monarchy is outmoded and that efforts on the British model to retain the form while changing the substance are as likely as not to fail.

This article constitutes an effort to suggest that even the most alien and unusual aspects of Middle East politics are in fact amenable to comparative analysis, with results both revealing about the region and illuminating theoretically. After all, many of the world's industrial democracies — from Britain to Japan — retain vestiges of once powerful monarchies and there is ample historical evidence that monarchies played important roles in nation building and state formation even where the regimes were subsequently replaced.

Twenty years ago, in one of the few efforts to address ruling monarchies in modern American political science, Samuel Huntington expressed the prevailing skepticism about monarchy as a viable regime type in the modern world. He argued that what he called “the king's dilemma” bodes poorly for the longevity of such a system. The centralization of power required to undertake social and economic transformation discourages monarchs from expanding their social base and prevents them from accommodating the political demands of the new social groups that are produced by the very same social and economic change. Thus he concluded that short of preventing economic and social change (which is ultimately impossible) monarchies are doomed to extinction. Manfred Halpern's earlier examination of the Middle Eastern cases themselves suggested more flexibility in principle: the monarchs have the option to limit their own prerogatives by constitutional restraints and to share powers, thereby retaining the right to reign if not to rule. Halpern was not optimistic, however, that any of the dynasts of the day would do so.¹

How might the unexpected resilience of monarchy in the Middle East be explained? The conventional argument rests on a sort of regional exceptionalism and cultural determinism: monarchy is a traditional and therefore congenial type of regime in the Islamic world. Indeed, Hisham Sharabi has recently suggested that what he calls “neopatriarchy” characterizes Arab politics; and “the neopatriarchal state, regardless of its legal and political forms and structures, is in many ways no more than a modernized version of the traditional patriarchal sultanate.”² Michael Hudson has also relied on cultural explanation in his treatment of the monarchies of the Arab world, although he begins to broach the argument advocated here:

The . . . monarchies . . . are peculiarly vulnerable to the tensions of modernization. Their legitimizing values are essentially rooted in kinship, religion, and custom. But they

¹ Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968); Manfred Halpern, *The Politics of Social Change in the Middle East and North Africa* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963).

² Hisham Sharabi, *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 7.

are by no means wholly traditional; they do not conform precisely to the classical Middle Eastern patriarchy. In fact, we observe strong attributes of modernity in the legitimacy formulas of even the most traditional kingdoms, just as we shall discover persistent strands of traditional identifications in the systems that have crossed the revolutionary divide.³

Intuitively plausible as cultural explanations of the adaptability of monarchy in the Middle East may be, they are empirically unsatisfactory on two grounds. First, monarchy as currently understood in the Middle East is no more indigenous than liberal democracy. Second, even if it were a traditional regime type, its alleged historical authenticity fails to explain the apparent ability of Middle Eastern monarchs to accommodate and even foster nontraditional – not to say modern – social and political change.

A variant of the cultural explanation emphasizes the specific circumstances of the region in the postwar era in a sort of musical chairs theory of politics. The continued existence of the monarchies of the Middle East is said to reflect the relative stability of all the incumbent regimes of the region since 1970; governments that survived the turbulent postindependence era of the 1950s and 1960s won a relatively permanent place at the party. Certainly the degree of political upheaval in the Middle East declined markedly during the 1970s and 1980s, but this accounts for neither the relatively high proportion of monarchies among the survivors nor particular character of the major regime change of the later period – the spectacular collapse of the Iranian monarchy in 1978–1979.

The prevalence of monarchy in the Middle East is best understood as a reflection of the vagaries of historical accident – particularly British imperial policy – and the imperatives of historical process – notably the formation of new states and the building of new nations in the realms until recently ruled by the Ottoman Empire and its neighbors. That is to say, the monarchies of the region were initially instruments of European imperial policy. In contrast to most of the rest of their imperial domains, notably sub-Saharan Africa, the Europeans, taken with what they believed to be political and cultural precedent, endowed the Middle East with an unusually large number of monarchies. These monarchies took root not because of such putative precedents, however, but because there is an affinity between monarchy as a regime type and the projects of nation building and state formation. This affinity was apparent in Europe in the age of absolutism, as it was in nineteenth-century Brazil and Japan, and it appears again in today's Middle East – so much so that many of the region's so-called presidential regimes mimic monarchies. Far from hindering change, certain characteristics of absolutist monarchy appear to be very useful in nation building and state formation. Thus, to put it baldly, there is a functional explanation that serves where cultural arguments fail to account for the resilience of monarchy in the Middle East.

It is well to remember that almost all the monarchies of the Middle East and North Africa are creations of the twentieth century. Only the Moroccan and Omani dynasties can claim a genuine centuries-long pedigree in power, and they reflect

³ Michael Hudson, *Arab Politics: The Search for Legitimacy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 165.

the imposition of foreign, largely European, political templates. What seems traditional to western eyes is, in fact, as much western as Middle Eastern tradition. By and large, both the existence and the character of the monarchies of the Middle East reflect British imperial policy in the region. Indeed, with the exception of Morocco, the closer the French were to influencing the political fortunes of a country, the less likely it was to retain or regain its independence as a monarchy. In all cases, including Morocco, monarchies were installed, retained, and refurbished because to a greater or lesser degree they served European imperial purposes.

Yet, if only because many former colonies in the Third World abandoned the regimes bequeathed them at independence, the resilience of the remaining monarchies in the Middle East merits further explanation. The American assumption that the monarchies would meet a fate similar to that of their postcolonial parliamentary counterparts and give way to military regimes was not entirely unwarranted, of course, and a lot of them did. Monarchy showed a higher survival rate than the presumably more modern parliamentary systems, however. In general, absolutist monarchies lasted longer than constitutional monarchies, such as those bequeathed Egypt and Iraq.

The relative strength of monarchy in the Middle East is not due to its evocation of regional traditions — hereditary monarchy as understood today is not a traditional regime type in the Middle East — but to its affinity with the projects of nation building and state formation, which consume the attention of all the rulers of the Middle East and North Africa. Huntington may be right that monarchy is ultimately too brittle and restrictive a regime to accommodate the political demands of new social groups. In the less than long run, however, monarchy is particularly well suited to the requirements of state formation, especially in its early stages. As Perry Anderson has shown, centralization of authority, destruction of old intermediate groups, establishment of nationwide conscription, taxation, and market relations can be effectively accomplished by absolutist monarchs ostensibly acting to preserve the historical prerogatives of the wealthy and powerful.⁴

Indeed, the sleight of hand implicit in modernizing monarchies may permit change to take place more incrementally and less disruptively than do the loud protestations of revolutionary intentions from equally authoritarian but ostensibly nationalist or socialist republican regimes. For monarchs, the availability of support from the old elite may allow substantially greater levels of voluntary compliance with the state's new extractive ambitions than would rule by "the people" or "the proletariat" that alienates the old elite before a new one is available to take its place.

Successful absolutist rulers presumably make themselves obsolete, revolutionary dictators no less than authoritarian monarchs. The second stage of state formation — the creation of durable bonds between the ruler and the ruled after old ties and relationships have been destroyed — is probably more easily negotiated

⁴ Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: Vergo, 1974), 17–18.

by regimes with already established commitments to popular sovereignty. Thus, monarchy does not provide the solution to all the dilemmas of state formation, but its affinity with the project's early stages may well account for its otherwise surprising resilience in the Middle East and North Africa.

Before examining the nature of the modern monarchies in the Middle East and North Africa, it is useful to survey how they came into being. Almost all the states of the region are products of the twentieth century — the monarchies no less than the republics — and fashioning a unified, loyal populace from the populations allotted them has been the paramount task of nearly all the region's rulers, kings and presidents alike.

The Creation of States in the Modern Middle East

During the nineteenth century, the French and British nibbled away at the periphery of the Ottoman Empire, all the while claiming fidelity to its integrity and independence. Having been chased from Egypt by the British twenty-five years earlier, the French began occupying Algeria in 1830. For the next fifty years, the British remained primarily concerned with access to India. Their interest in the Persian/Arabian Gulf eventually led to the antipiracy treaties with locally powerful families who were thereby elevated to the status of rulers along the Trucial (that is, regulated by truces) Coast. By the 1880s, the integrity of the Ottoman Empire had been severely compromised as the British occupied Egypt and the French declared a protectorate in Tunisia. In both cases, local dynasties that were formally representatives of the Ottoman sultan were retained, "protected" by the foreign power. (Britain transformed its de facto occupation of Egypt into a de jure protectorate in 1914.)

In the first decade of the twentieth century, revolutions combining elements of anti-imperialism, nationalism, and constitutionalism broke out in both the Ottoman and Persian Empires. The resulting regimes were short-lived, however, because the Europeans were not sympathetic to what they viewed as assaults on the stability of the region. World War I and its aftermath definitively and permanently changed the face of the Middle East, constituting the single most important political event in the area since the consolidation of the Ottoman Empire in the sixteenth century.

When the dust settled after 1918, Ottoman Anatolia and Istanbul retained their independence as Turkey, a tribute to the military acumen and nationalist zeal of a number of former Ottoman military officers, notably Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. Iran also retained its independence, although the crippled Qajar dynasty was overthrown by a military officer much like Turkey's Ataturk, Reza Khan. Reza declared himself the first Pahlevi shah in 1926. Most of the rest of the region fell under European rule.

Ottoman Libya had already been occupied by Italy in 1911, and the Moroccan sultan had agreed to French protection in 1912. The remaining Arab provinces

of the Ottoman Empire were divided between Britain and France. France was given responsibility for the League of Nations mandates in Lebanon and Syria, leaving Britain in control of what became Palestine, Transjordan, and Iraq. Already installed in Egypt and the Gulf sheikdoms, the British enjoyed substantial influence in the nominally independent interior of the Arabian peninsula, where the Saud family from the Najd, the central region, chased the ruling Hashemite family from the holy cities of Mecca and Medina in the western Hijaz region in the early 1920s. By the beginning of the 1930s, domestic rebellions had been put down and the architect of the state, 'Abd al-'Aziz, known as Ibn Saud, adopted the title King of Saudi Arabia.

The French appear never to have considered establishing monarchies in their mandated territories; both Syria and Lebanon were destined from the outset to lives as republics. The British, however, because of promises made to the Hashemite rulers of the holy cities in the heat of World War I—and presumably because they found it a congenial regime—established Hashemite monarchies in both Transjordan and Iraq, ruled by the Hashemite patriarch's sons, Abdallah and Faisal. By 1926, when Reza Khan chose to declare himself shah instead of president of Iran, monarchies accounted for all but one of the independent countries of the region (the exception is Turkey) and well over half of the rest: Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, North Yemen, Oman, the Trucial States, Kuwait, Iraq, and Jordan. There was still one to come, for just as the dynasts of Egypt (overthrown in 1952) and Tunisia (deposed at independence in 1956) were seeing their last days in power, the British were shepherding Libya to independence in 1951 under King Idris, the leader of a religious brotherhood that had opposed the Italians and who had been in exile in British-ruled Cairo for thirty years.

Thus, of the monarchies that saw independence in the 1950s, only those in Morocco, Oman, Egypt, and North Yemen existed independently in the nineteenth century (and the latter two would shortly be overthrown). Several had disappeared in the interim, most importantly the Ottoman sultan but also the Tunisian bey; and a number had been created—in Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the Trucial States. In non-Arab Iran, the monarchy remained but the dynasty changed.

From Sultans to Kings: The Installation of "Traditional" Regimes

These twentieth-century monarchies are only tenuously related to earlier Middle Eastern regimes. While we need not examine indigenous theories of politics and statecraft in depth, several features of classical Islamic political theory and practice will suggest the novelty of the modern monarchies.

The European theory of rule that undergirds monarchy is, as might be expected of the birthplace of capitalism, intimately linked to property. In the European past, according to Reinhard Bendix:

the exercise of governmental authority was an aspect of family and property. The various functions of government were appropriated on a hereditary basis by a governing

class consisting of a king, his high officials, the magnates of the realm, and privileged corporations which controlled their respective territories and thus ruled the country.⁵

This is in marked contrast to the Middle Eastern past. Since the coming of Islam in the seventh century A.D. and its subsequent dispersion throughout the Middle East and North Africa, political authority has been exercised and justified not as an aspect of family or property but on religious grounds. The Arabic word used today for king — *malik* — connotes property or possession in addition to rule. Although it had been a common title for rulers in the pre-Islamic era, in the early years of Islam it was reserved for God, the “Possessor [*malik*] of Heaven and Earth.” Pious rulers were called *khalifa* [caliph, “deputy” or “successor” of the Prophet Muhammad] or *imam* [prayer leader] and *malik* was a term of contempt reserved for nonbelievers. In later centuries, *malik* regained some favor but it was not as majestic as *sultan*, which also denotes secular power or authority (though not ownership); and it had again fallen out of use by the twentieth century.⁶

The sole acknowledged rationale for rule was the welfare of the community of the faithful. Unlike a merely secular ruler, the *khalifa* or *imam* is responsible for the well-being of his charges. Islam provides a model of political authority that emphasizes preservation of the community. Albert Hourani has described the ruler thus:

The ideal of the absolute ruler, standing apart from the society as he rules, responsible only to God or to his own highest self; regulating the different orders of that society in the light of the principles of justice, so as to enable each to act in accordance with its own nature, to live in harmony with others, and to contribute its share to the general good.⁷

How that might be accomplished was variously interpreted and the standards for selection of and fidelity to the ruler were not uniform from time to time or place to place. Unquestioned, however, was the religious obligation of the ruler: there could be no separation of the realms of God and Caesar if the purpose of human society was to fulfill religious imperatives. The notion that the ruler’s responsibility to God could only be met by fulfillment of his responsibility to safeguard the community was borne out in several characteristics of early modern politics in the region.

First, selection to the office of ruler was not fixed. Hereditary monarchy was not formally admitted, since in principle the ruler was selected not merely because he was his predecessor’s son and heir or the senior member of the ruling family,

⁵ Reinhard Bendix, *Kings or People* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 228.

⁶ G. A. Ayalon, “Malik,” *Encyclopedia of Islam*, vol. VI (Leiden, The Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1987), 261–262.

⁷ Albert Hourani, *The Emergence of the Modern Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 3. That this kind of political theory is not unique to Islam but shared, at least in part, by other religious traditions as they seek to advise on regulation of social life in this world is suggested by the parallels with Catholic political theory as described by Alfred Stepan, *The State and Society: Peru in Comparative Perspective* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978).

but because he was the best qualified to lead. In practice, of course, the ruler was usually a member of his predecessor's family (though, on the principle of family seniority, as often as not a brother, uncle, or nephew rather than first-born son). But his assumption of the throne had to be ratified: the *bay'a* or pledge of allegiance by the community or its representatives was an integral part of the installation of a new ruler. Similarly, the ruler was enjoined to seek the advice of representatives of the community in a process of *shura*, or consultation.

The combination of religious and worldly authority created a fluid and ambiguous system for determining succession. Sometimes religious institutions elected a spiritual leader for the community; sometimes—more often in fact—heredity determined the identity of the ruler and the religious establishment merely ratified his accession. The two principles were variously emphasized depending on the relative strength of the ruler and the religious establishment.

Virtually since its inception, western observers of this system have assumed that the religious authorities constituted a weak constraint on the arbitrary powers of the ruler: their moral authority was assumed to be no match for the force exercised by the ruler. Thus, for example, have Max Weber and his followers made “sultanism” and “qadi justice” synonymous with the arbitrary and capricious exercise of power.⁸ In fact, however, the primacy of the ruler was by no means a foregone conclusion. Because Islamic law, unlike Roman Catholic canon law, is supposed to regulate the ordinary life of the believer, one of the primary responsibilities of the ruler is to ensure application of the *shari'ah*, as the legal system is known, in both the public and private lives of the believers. As a result, the political power and social prestige of the religious officials as the staff of the judiciary often allowed religious authorities to exercise control and demand accountability from the secular rulers.

Nonetheless, the shifting fortunes of the secular and religious authorities began to tilt decisively in favor of the former by the time the gunpowder empires were established in the sixteenth century and the limits the religious authorities imposed on the rulers waned.⁹ This had an important consequence for politics. As J. C. Hurewitz has suggested:

The absence of fixed rules of succession was an important generator of military politics in Islam. The principle of primogeniture, almost uniformly applied in Europe, was not recognized in Islam, least of all among the Muslim dynasties of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. All male members of an extended royal family were acceptable candidates for the throne—brothers, nephews, and uncles as well as sons and grandsons. In theory the successor was elected, but a mode of orderly election never became institutionalized. As a consequence, Islamic politics, hovering between hereditary and “elective” monarchies, became inured to violent and disorderly succession whenever the reigning monarch's wishes were not honored after his death.¹⁰

⁸ See, for example, Talcott Parsons, “Introduction” in Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (New York: Free Press, 1947), 62.

⁹ Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, vol. III, *The Gunpowder Empires and Modern Times* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

¹⁰ J. C. Hurewitz, *Middle East Politics: The Military Dimension* (New York: Octagon Press, 1974), 18.

By the nineteenth century, the European imperial powers began to see this pattern as detrimental to their own interest in regional stability. Thus did they attempt to regulate succession. This was one of the principal aims of the British in their treaties with the “royal families” of the Gulf sheikdoms, with the result that families who had been no more than *primus inter pares* were recognized — and protected — as ruling families with dynastic rights. It was also, along with other westernizing provisions, a significant element in the constitutions promulgated in the region in the last third of the century.

The institution of hereditary succession by European powers dramatically increased the monarch’s arena of arbitrary prerogatives, even for those families already well established as dynasties, as in Morocco. As a Moroccan scholar suggests in discussing the Moroccan monarchy’s legal foundation after independence:

[b]y separating the idea of representation from that of election, the constitution made the monarchy the expression of national sovereignty . . . [T]he hereditary monarchy envisaged in the constitutional draft of 1908 was introduced [in the post-independence constitutions], consummating the break with the tradition of the *bei’a* [*bay’a*] and assuring monarchical succession. Even though the *bei’a* had been limited in fact by the role of other elements such as the royal family and the army, it did imply a responsibility of the monarch to his people. . . . This fact was seized upon by Allal al-Fassi [leader of the nationalist party] to justify his conception of a constitutional monarchy where the king reigned but did not govern, and responsibility fell to the ministers.¹¹

The Moroccan monarchs did not find al-Fassi’s suggestion appealing. They chose instead to use the ritual of the *bay’a* in an annual ceremony to symbolize the allegiance of the kingdom’s elite to the person and institution of the monarch. The Moroccan kings replaced the contractual link between monarch and people broken with the supplanting of the *bay’a* by heredity with a novel, metaphysical tie between ruler and ruled:

In 1970, it was added to the constitution that the king is the “supreme representative of the nation.” This concept has nothing to do with either the Islamic tradition or Western constitutional law. It stems rather from European monarchical theories of the eighteenth century, which saw the king as the incarnation of the whole nation.¹²

Indeed, in one of the more ironic twists in this tale, it was the militantly modernist and republican nationalist movement that gave the Moroccan monarch the position from which he eventually challenged and defeated them after independence. As Mark Tessler points out, it was the nationalists who “made the sultan a symbol of opposition to the French and began to refer to him as the ‘king’ of Morocco.”¹³

By that time, the modern connotations of the title king or *malik* had been rec-

¹¹ Rkia el-Mossadeq, “Political Parties and Power-Sharing” in I. William Zartman, ed., *The Political Economy of Morocco* (New York: Praeger, 1987), 66.

¹² Alain Claisse, “Makhzen Traditions and Administrative Channels” in Zartman, ed., *The Political Economy of Morocco*, 39.

¹³ Mark Tessler, “Image and Reality in Moroccan Political Economy” in Zartman, ed., *The Political Economy of Morocco*, 225.

ognized elsewhere in the Arab world as well. As G. A. Ayalon suggests, at the beginning of the twentieth century,

following more than a century of contacts with European monarchies, the idea of kingship acquired new respect in the Islamic countries and *malik* lost whatever was left of its uncomplimentary associations. Its reappearance was, thus, not a revitalization of the old title but rather a calque of “king” or “roi” in the modern European sense.¹⁴

The first to use the title was the Hashemite ruler of Mecca and Medina, Hussein, who in the excitement of the British-fostered Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire of World War I declared himself “King of the Hijaz,” a title he held until 1926, when the Saudi leader Ibn Saud conquered the region and took the title “Sultan of Najd and King [*malik*] of Hijaz.” In 1932, Ibn Saud consolidated his realms and declared himself “king of Saudi Arabia.” In the meantime, Hussein’s son had briefly declared himself king of Syria in 1921 before being chased out by the French authorities and installed by Britain as king of Iraq. In 1922 the sultan of Egypt traded his title to become king; in 1946, Amir [“commander,” sometimes “prince”] Abdallah became “King of Transjordan,” a country renamed several years later the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. In 1951 Idris took the throne as king in newly independent Libya; and in 1957, the Moroccan sultan took the title *malik*, thus making known “his intention to introduce a modern type of government.”¹⁵

Among the implications of the change in title was a change in the mechanisms by which the ruler’s obligation to protect the spiritual welfare of his subjects would be fulfilled. Although all monarchs in the Arab world acknowledge this as one of their principal duties—there is no entirely secular monarchy—it is now rarely interpreted as requiring consultation with an independent religious establishment. On the contrary, most of the monarchies have vigorously asserted the primacy of secular principles, programs, or patrons.

The Saudi regime, for example, while still more solicitous of religious sentiment and obligation than most, decisively established its paramount status in crushing a religious rebellion in the early 1930s. The Saud family had been prominent in peninsular politics since their alliance in the mid-eighteenth century with the founder of a religious reform movement, Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab. Although Saudi political fortunes waned for a time in the nineteenth century, the Wahhabis, as they were known in the West, and their exponents among the Saud family continued to make common cause. Together they triumphed in much of the peninsula by the mid-1920s. Before they did so, however, a reform-within-the-reform movement appeared—the Ikhwan—that was determined to prevent a relaxation of the austerity of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s legacy. When in the 1930s they believed themselves and their cause threatened, they revolted. The Saud family decisively crushed that challenge, and while it has made a show of its continued ties with the descendants of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab since, it is the religious officials or *ulama* who are closely supervised by the government rather than the reverse.

¹⁴ Ayalon, “Malik.”

¹⁵ Ibid.

An even more effective resolution of the ruler's residual religious obligation is, for those who can claim it, combining in the monarch both political and religious authority. Two rulers who can do so are the kings of Morocco and Jordan, both of whom are descendants of the Prophet Muhammad. Although this in itself is no indication of special powers, both Hassan and Hussein have gone out of their way to remind their subjects of this status and thereby suggest that they take their obligations as religious leaders seriously.

Like virtually all the other rulers in the Islamic world, the kings of the Middle East and North Africa have taken advantage of the ideological and structural dictates of modernization to rid themselves of an independent religious establishment. Even the conservative monarchies that failed to embrace the secularization of politics advocated so vocally by the ostensibly socialist regimes of the 1950s and 1960s have taken pains to limit the financial independence of the religious establishment. Most religious officials are now salaried employees of the state. Their traditional sources of income for religious purposes such as mosque upkeep came from property endowments known as *waqf*. These lands — which sometimes accounted for as much as a third of all agricultural land — have been taken over by the state either to be directly administered or dissolved altogether as archaic impediments to economic modernization. As a result of these kinds of policies, the rulers of the region today — kings and presidents alike — are freer of constraints imposed by social organizations and institutions than at any time in the past.

Absolutism and the Imperatives of State Formation

As we have seen, few of the monarchies of the Middle East are endowed with deeper historical roots or greater traditional legitimacy than their avowedly liberal or socialist republican counterparts. In many other respects as well, the republican regimes mimic the monarchies. Indeed, the region is rife with “presidential monarchies,” regimes in which a strongman dominates a state with relatively few stable political institutions. From Algeria's Houari Boumedienne, Tunisia's Habib Bourguiba, Libya's Muammar el-Qaddafi, Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser and Anwar Sadat, Syria's Hafiz el-Asad to Iraq's Saddam Hussein, postindependence politics in the Arab world has been typified by highly centralized and personalized regimes. King Farouk of Egypt is said to have remarked, “My good Pasha, the will of the people emanates from my will!” Tunisia's President Bourguiba is said to have answered an American researcher's query, “What system? I *am* the system!”¹⁶

As in the formal monarchies in almost all of these governments the family of the ruler has been prominent in the ruling circles: Bourguiba's son, Qaddafi's cousins, Asad's brother, Saddam's in-laws have all played important roles in the policy-making and security establishments. Moreover, in recent years and after

¹⁶ Farouk quoted by P. J. Vatikiotis, *The Egyptian Army in Politics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1961), 39. Bourguiba quoted in Clement Henry Moore, *Tunisia Since Independence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965).

several decades of instability in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly in the Fertile Crescent, the president's designated successor has usually assumed power upon the death or disability of the ruler. In Algeria, where Boumedienne appeared to have had no favorite, his successor was selected by the elite of the ruling party and the army. By and large, ratification of the ruler's selection by his predecessor—or at most his election by a small elite—constitutes the procedure for succession, one little different in substance from King Hussein's designation of his brother, or King Hassan's of his son, or the Saud family princes' agreement on an order of succession.

Typically, these patterns of recruitment and succession, like the resilience of the formal monarchies themselves, are attributed to regional traditions. In an influential text, James Bill and Carl Leiden argue, for example:

Despite all the differences that separate Middle Eastern leaders and elites, there are in the Muslim world a number of deep seated and persisting similarities in rule. These similarities . . . have existed throughout Islamic history and can be traced to the days of the Prophet Muhammad, himself the model par excellence of political leadership. . . . Today, throughout the Islamic world, millions of Muslims continue to pattern their lives after his. It is not surprising, therefore, that twentieth-century Muslim political leaders often have styles and use strategies that are very similar to those instituted by the Prophet Muhammad in Arabia some 1,400 years ago.¹⁷

Yet, in many important respects, the modern Middle Eastern monarchs are more similar to European nation builders and state makers than to Middle Eastern prophets. As Charles Tilly has argued:

our study of the European experience suggests that most of the transformations European states accomplished until late in their histories were by-products of the consolidation of central control; that the forms of government themselves resulted largely from the way coercion and extraction were carried on; that most members of the populations over which the managers of states were trying to extend their control resisted the state-making efforts; and that the major forms of political participation which westerners now complacently refer to as "modern" are for the most part unintended outcomes of the efforts of European state-makers to build their armies, keep the taxes coming in, form effective coalitions against their rivals, hold their nominal subordinates and allies in line, and fend off the threat of rebellion on the part of ordinary people.¹⁸

The regimes that are typical of such periods of state formation and nation building are centralizing or centralized, repressive, and poorly institutionalized. Old privileges are under challenge and new rights are still unsecured; old institutions are ignored and new procedures are still undetermined. Indeed, precisely because of the magnitude of the transformation, this is a period of unusual uncertainty. The reliance on personal relationships, on friends and family, which is so often noted in politics in the Middle East, is less a reflection of tradition than it is a result of the

¹⁷ James Bill and Carl Leiden, *Politics in the Middle East*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1984), 133.

¹⁸ Charles Tilly, ed., *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975), 663.

novelty and instability of formal, impersonal institutions and relations. As Robert Jackson and Carl Rosberg suggest in discussing sub-Saharan Africa:

In general personal regimes may be thought of as typical of transitional periods, when one institutionalized order has broken down and another has not yet replaced it. In early modern European history, good examples of such a transition are states which emerged out of the late medieval period; during the Renaissance and the civil and religious wars that followed, the boundaries, structures, and institutions of these states were not yet settled in the minds of the people; as a result, absolutism became a widespread system of rule.¹⁹

Obviously, state formation in today's Africa or Middle East is not the same as that of Europe centuries ago. The international environment is entirely different and the impetus to state formation today is largely external to society. As a result, social change follows as often as it forces change in the state. Moreover, as Bendix points out, for all the violence for which the Middle East is so well-known, it pales by European standard, where

the institutions of the state were formed not only over centuries, but specifically through organization for war. . . . Sabotage, armed struggle, nonviolent resistance, and all the other devices of [twentieth century] independence movements did not help build state institutions as did the system of vassalage and later the collection of taxes or the control of civilian populations for the organization of military supplies and the deployment of military forces.²⁰

The monarchies no less than the republics in the Middle East reflect the imperatives of state formation where state institutions are few and weak. The monarchies provide a regime compatible with (though not, obviously, required by) those imperatives — centralized, personalistic, actually or potentially coercive. Moreover — and here the analogy with Perry Anderson's absolutist rulers is quite striking — the monarchs of the Middle East can oversee vast changes in the name of preservation, inventing traditions as they go along. Indeed, one of the interesting recent preoccupations of the oil-rich Arab states around the Gulf has been in academic research that contributes to "reconstruction of the local heritage [*turath*]."²¹ Finally, insofar as state formation requires building coalitions with representatives of social groups, monarchies are relatively well equipped to reassure the previously privileged, a stratum often of particular importance in the early stages of national transformation.

¹⁹ Robert H. Jackson and Carl G. Rosberg, *Personal Rule in Black Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 5.

²⁰ Bendix, *Kings or People*, 602.

²¹ The utility of shared traditions in nation-building is often remarked in the literature on nationalism and nation building, but there has been little attention to the ease with which such traditions may be concocted when they are absent "in nature," as it were. One of the exceptions is *The Invention of Tradition* edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1983). An effort to examine this phenomenon in the Middle East is made in the forthcoming *Power and Representation: State Formation and Intellectual Paradigms in Arab Oil-Producing Countries* edited by Eric Davis and Nicolas Gavrielides.

The relative weakness of institutions at this stage of state formation amplifies the importance of statecraft. Thus have many rulers in the Middle East, monarchs and presidents alike, proven unable to keep themselves in power. Mediocrity in a monarch usually heralds the end of the monarchy and so draws more attention than the collapse of yet another military regime; but it oftentimes means little more. The monarchs who have been able to sustain and build their own power are neither more nor less adept at the politics of state formation than their republican counterparts: Kings Hassan of Morocco and Hussein of Jordan are master politicians, as were Turkey's Ataturk, Egypt's Nasser, and Tunisia's Bourguiba.

Adroitly handled, monarchy presents some advantages to the state maker in the Middle East. By European standards, the historical claims on the monarchs on the part of powerful groups in society are neither numerous nor onerous. Obviously, many of the monarchies themselves are new and therefore unburdened by bargains made with social groups in the distant past, but even those that are not young have benefited from the influence of European expansion in weakening rival claimants to power. Not only is the local bourgeoisie likely to be small and timorous, and the local proletariat virtually nonexistent, but even the landed elite constitutes a negligible challenge. In most of the region, the landed elite enjoys a pedigree no older than a century, as title to collectively-held agricultural land was systematically assigned to individuals only in the middle of the nineteenth century, at the behest of European real estate speculators.²² Thus the danger that the landed nobility might capture the state and retard or prevent capitalist development and democratization is considerably diminished; the monarch risks little in an alliance of convenience with the rural notables while presumably laying the groundwork for the growth of bourgeois capitalism. This has been the strategy of the Moroccan monarch and, if tribes can be understood as comparable to rural notables, of the Jordanian and Saudi kings as well. In the meantime the monarch, unlike his republican counterparts, has not admitted any ideological rationale for challenging his centralized authoritarian rule.

By contrast, the republican state maker, in appealing to notions of popular sovereignty to justify his rule, finds much sentimental support among the previously disadvantaged. But he also lays himself open to challenge as an autocrat betraying his own principles. Certainly the populist regimes in Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Algeria have all faced serious criticism as traitors to the egalitarian ideals they so fervently espouse. Moreover and perhaps more importantly, as a class, the previously disadvantaged are not necessarily a coherent, reliable, or even useful ally. The privileges acquired in the last thirty or forty years by the lower middle classes in all these countries — food subsidies, free education, guaranteed employment — have swollen the state budgets and bureaucracies beyond the capacity of the local economies to sustain and have proved quite as difficult to reverse as any of the classic privileges of Europe's landed aristocracy.

²² Haim Gerber, *The Social Origins of the Modern Middle East* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1987).

Of course, there are disadvantages to monarchy. Ambiguous or nonexistent reference to popular sovereignty in the legal or theoretical foundations of these regimes and their half-hearted commitment to egalitarian values does ultimately raise the question of who is to benefit from the transformation. In early European state formation, such a question never came up; few would have argued with the right of the monarch to profit, and in any event, there were few alternate models of politics that might have challenged the absolutist path. Yet apart from personal greed and historical ambition — traits by no means limited to monarchs, of course — there is little incentive for kings to look to the future development of their countries except dynastic solidarity: presumably no king wants himself or his successor to be the end of the dynasty. This is no doubt a very powerful motive for the monarch himself, but as a rationale for popular sacrifice it pales before the nationalism and egalitarianism implied in popular sovereignty.

Political regimes based on ideological formulations of politics, on the promise of a better future, and on notions of popular participation and egalitarian representation are able to accommodate new groups with new demands. As Huntington suggests, this probably makes them better suited to the later stages of nation building and state formation, when durable ties between the new state and citizens are forged. When so many countries of the Middle East are only decades old, however, and when popular loyalties are uncertain and political institutions untried, the advantages of legitimated absolutism are considerable. The ability of a monarch to appeal to traditions, albeit often invented, to reassure the existing elite, to rely on his own kinsmen — perhaps even to hobnob with international bankers and ride horseback with presidents — is useful indeed.*

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